



TEASINGLY BIZARRE-Despite ominous garb of Gene Simmons, left, and Ace Frehley, Kiss' weekend shows at the Forum were largely good-natured, cartoonish exercises.
Times photos by Larry Bessel



L.A. KISSES--Fans from left, Jay Dessert, Amy Sterzik, Ron Reyes sport makeup.

POP MUSIC REVIEW

Kiss to Build a Dream On

BY ROBERT HILBURN

Times Pop Music Critic

Before Bob Dylan and the Beatles gave it respectability, rock 'n' roll was dismissed by most adults as shrewd but untalented musicians preying on the prurient interests of a young, unsuspecting audience.

A quick glance at Kiss' three weekend concerts at the Inglewood Forum was enough to make most of those grouchy detractors from two decades ago seem like prophets.

Picking up where ghoulish Alice Cooper left off, Kiss mixed demonic makeup, fire-spitting antics and flashy stage effects for some sideshow hokum that would have made even P. T. Barnum take notes.

Often theatrics cause an audience to overlook a band's solid musical capabilities, but that's not the case with Kiss. The vocals are undistinguished, the songs are rarely more than passable and the musicianship isn't likely to win its members a place on anyone's all-star poll.

But it's hard to take offense at Kiss. That's largely because the band has a good-natured, unpretentious stance on stage. They don't pretend to be anything more than comic-book figures. And, yes, there is a Kiss comic book on the market.

Please Turn to Page 6, Col. 1

A Kiss to Build a Dream On

Continued from First Page

When Gene Simmons prowls the stage in his six-inch platforms and sticks his tongue out at the audience in quick, lizardlike strokes, it's just in fun. The band may be shrewd and the audience may be young, but nobody's being fooled.

Despite its somewhat ominous overtones, Kiss is no more dangerous or perverse than a walk through the haunted house at Disneyland. And it's a lot more lively. The concert is like an extension of the barroom scene from "Star Wars." It's not as imaginatively staged, but just as teasingly bizarre.

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Exclusivity has long been part of the teen-age lure of rock. Elvis, Little Richard, the early Beatles and Rolling Stones were discovered by and became the private property of the young. The fact that parents didn't understand or initially relate to these acts made them all the more important as youthful rallying points.

Part of the weakness of rock today—from a sociological standpoint—is that most top acts appeal to such a wide age range that teen-agers have no identity post. Fleetwood Mac, the Eagles, the Who draw fans in their 40s and beyond.

The whole Sex Pistols-led, punk-rock wave in England is partially a cry for identity among teen-agers in that economically troubled country. Kiss, along with Aerosmith, is one of the few hugely popular U.S. groups whose appeal here is almost solely to teen-agers.

Aerosmith is more interesting musically, but it is also more conservative. It operates from a snarling, punkish manner that can be traced to dozens of bands, including the Stones.

Kiss' flamboyance gives it more personality. Audiences can dress up like Kiss and copy the makeup. The group's themes and stage approach are bold, blatant and aggressive. It's plunder and rampage rock, based on achieving sexual and social desires.

Bob Ezrin, who produced Kiss' "Destroyer" album, sees the band as a "caricature of all the urges of youth." Kiss' Gene Simmons views it as a form of release. "You scream and all that frustration goes out. When people become disenchanted with the world, they turn to fantasy and here we are . . . We're fantasy figures."

Ron Reyes, a 16-year-old student at Mira Costa High School, was one of perhaps four dozen people wearing Kiss makeup Sunday night at the Forum.

"The band changed my life," he said, tugging at his silver jump suit. "I used to be into mellow music. I would never have thought of putting on an outfit like this. I still have other favorites. I saw Emerson, Lake & Palmer and Carole King. But Kiss is something special. It's everything you wanted to do, but were afraid to try. It's a total release . . ."

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Kiss was formed by guitarist Paul Stanley and bassist Gene Simmons in New York in '73. They wanted a highly commercial, lavishly theatrical band. The Dolls were the hot item in New York at the time, but Kiss was too husky for the Dolls' feminine, rock 'n' rouge image. They found a better model in Alice Cooper.

Picking up drummer Pete Criss through an ad in Rolling Stone and guitarist Ace Frehley through another in the Village Voice, they originally thought about adopting another, more sexually explicit four-letter word for a title but figured Kiss would be a bit safer.

With Alice Cooper moving toward Hollywood Squares and the show business mainstream, Kiss found a slot for itself in the highly fragmented rock concert picture. They adopted costumes and all sorts of flashy devices. Simmons eventually breathed fire and spat blood. Audiences responded.

The band's music, however, was dreary. Critics who picked up the early albums quite rightly shuddered at the plodding vocals and songs. Though the group did well on stage, it didn't break into the Top 10 until it released a live album late in '75.

But it wasn't until producer Ezrin hooked up with Kiss that the band's music developed a focus. Ezrin, who had previously worked with Alice Cooper, emphasized the teen-age frustration and alienation undercurrents of their costuming and music.

In "Flaming Youth" from the "Destroyer" album, Kiss adopted the classic misunderstood pose: "My parents think I'm crazy/And they hate the things I do/(They think) I'm stupid and I'm lazy/Man, if they only knew . . ." Not exactly Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited" but to the point.

Without Ezrin, Kiss' last two albums haven't advanced much beyond "Destroyer." Most of the new "Love Gun" is plodding and unconvincing.

But the records are mostly just souvenirs of the live show. Kiss' impact is on stage. That's why the group recorded the Forum shows for another live album. Due in November, it provides the purest sample of the group's strengths.

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"All right, Los Angeles," the announcer shouted Sunday night as the house lights dimmed at the Forum after a strong set by Cheap Trick. "You wanted the best and you've got the best . . . the hottest band in the world . . . Kiss!"

The cheering was so loud when the band appeared that you'd have thought the Beatles had reformed. Or, at least, the Mamas & Papas.

Emphasizing material from its last three LPs, Kiss wasted little time in getting to the music. More precisely, it wasted little time in getting to the special effects. Though many in the audience knew the songs well enough to sing along with the words, the songs often seemed like time-killers as the next effect was being readied.

There was a huge burst of flame on one side of the stage; an explosion from another; smoke from behind the drum kits; platforms that raised 12 to 15 feet in the air. Plus the constant swaggering and posturing of the band itself. And Simmons' fire-breathing and blood-spurting. And on and on. The gimmicks weren't as fully defined as Alice Cooper's, but they were more colorful.

While it all seemed nicely diverting for the audience, it was hardly a substitute for the solid, invigorating rock 'n' roll offered by the classic bands. It's "fun," the group's fans like to say, and so it is, but the lack of artistry makes it as temporary as the makeup on the faces of the band and the audience.

When the next truly invigorating, sociologically important rock experience arrives, the audience will be touched in a way that won't be washed away with soap and water. When it does happen, Kiss—however entertaining its show—will take its place alongside Grand Funk, Iron Butterfly and other rock disposables. But hold onto the Kiss comic books. They have a way of increasing in value over the years.